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- Cover illustration Portrait of Shao Xunmei 邵洵美 by Xu Beihong 徐悲鴻,  
*Golden Chamber Monthly* 1.2 (February 1929)

## LA MAISON D'OR —

### THE SUMPTUOUS WORLD OF SHAO XUNMEI

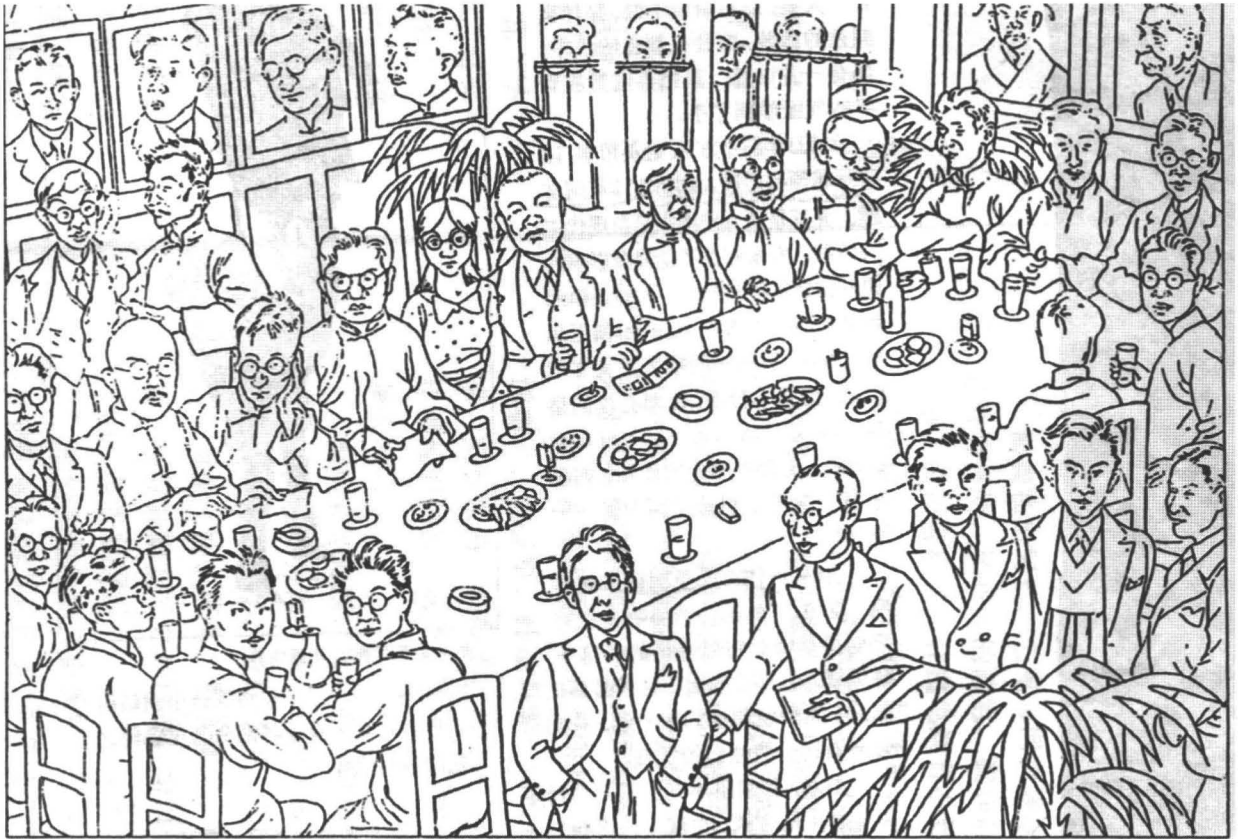
史 Jonathan Hutt

In 1936, the up-and-coming artist Lu Shaofei 魯少飛 contributed a sketch to the inaugural issue of a new cultural journal, *Six Arts* (Liu yi 六藝), entitled “Portrait of a Literary Gathering” (Wentan chahua tu 文壇茶話圖).<sup>1</sup> The cartoon depicted an imaginary meeting of China’s literary elite, bringing together in one room authors responsible for some of the most innovative works to emerge since the New Culture movement. At first glance, this drawing might easily be mistaken for the type of self-aggrandizing exercise common amongst China’s notoriously egotistical men of letters. In fact, quite the reverse is true. Lu’s illustration is a cutting parody of the heavyweights on the Chinese literary scene, offering an insider’s look at the jealousies, naked animosity, and ideological warfare that were then prevalent. The artist’s mischievous seating plan plays up these divisions, placing sworn enemies side by side, bringing tensions dangerously close to boiling point. These tortuous interpersonal relationships are now well documented, but sadly, the man Lu selected as host and charged with maintaining this fragile peace remains virtually unknown today. And yet he was an individual blessed with the unique ability to transcend factional boundaries, a man who consorted with left-wing dramatists and apolitical humourists alike; a one time pin-up boy of Shanghai’s Francophiles, he shared the back of his limousine with such notable literary figures as Lu Xun 魯迅 while his literary merits were endorsed by the noted romantic poet Xu Zhimo 徐志摩. This extraordinary individual was Shao Xunmei 邵洵美 (1906–68).

I would like to express my deep gratitude to the *East Asian History* reader who offered not only encouragement but also provided many thoughtful suggestions, ideas and avenues of enquiry. I would also like to thank the editor, Professor Geremie Barmé, for his patience and continuing support. Without their valuable advice, this work would be severely diminished.

<sup>1</sup> *Liu yi* 1.1 (15 February 1936): 8.

By 1936, Shao’s star was waning. His latest collection of poems, due to be published that year, would fail to cause a ripple. His extensive publishing interests, meanwhile, were proving to be a financial disaster, forcing him to produce pulp fiction in order to cover his mounting debts. If Shao’s name was mentioned it was more likely in reference to his scandalous love life than his



**Figure 1**

Lu Shaofei, "Portrait of a Literary Gathering," *Six Arts (Liu yi) 1.1* (15 February 1936): 8

<sup>2</sup> Shao Xunmei, *Tiantang yu wuyue* [Paradise and May] (Shanghai: Guanghua Shuju, 1927).

literary prowess. At the age of thirty, Shao was close to becoming a has-been.

How then did he warrant inclusion in this visual Who's Who of the literary *beau monde*? Was this simply Lu's gesture of gratitude for Shao's support early in his career? If his position centre stage seems somewhat tenuous, this would certainly not have been the case a decade earlier. Then, at the tender age of twenty-one, he made a sensational debut with the publication of his first collection of decadence-infused poetry, *Paradise and May* (*Tiantang yu wuyue* 天堂與五月).<sup>2</sup> But his celebrity was not confined to Baudelarian chic. Undoubtedly his social pre-eminence owed more to his personality and lifestyle than to his "immoral" verse. Aristocrat, millionaire, collector, playboy, socialite, dandy and businessman—Shao's numerous personae speak volumes on the true nature of literary fame in Republican Shanghai. Consequently, Shao's *belle époque* coincided with the golden age of China's first great metropolis. He was not simply a product of this city and a reflection of its aspirations, he was ultimately also a victim of its fickleness.

*Succès de Scandale*

The gates of Heaven have swung open,  
O Lord, I am not one to enter.  
I have found comfort in hell,  
I have already dreamed of awakening,  
In the short night.

— “May,” from *Paradise and May*

“... like a piece of jade heaping praise upon another piece of jade.”

— Chen Mengjia 陳夢家 commenting on the poem  
“Xunmei’s dream”

“China has a new poet, its very own Verlaine”

— Xu Zhimo on Shao Xunmei

This glowing endorsement from China’s first modern celebrity poet followed the publication in 1927 of Shao’s poetry collection, *Paradise and May*. Comparison to the French *poète maudit* was high praise indeed, considering that for several years the Chinese literati had displayed almost unhealthy fixation with the cultural heroes and literary ‘isms’ of nineteenth-century France. This idolatry was at its most extreme in the salon of Shanghai’s Francophiles where in the late 1920s Zeng Pu 曾樸 and his son, Xubai 曾虛白 indulged in playing the roles of Dumas *père et fils*, entertaining the Chinese equivalents of Loti, Flaubert, and France.

Shao’s début was timed perfectly. This was the era in which the prime literary value was “neither the expertise of craftsmanship nor the vigour or exuberance of creative imagination but rather the intensity of the author’s own emotional experience.”<sup>3</sup> Consequently, the extravagant passions contained in these thirty-three poems were difficult to ignore. For the likes of Xu, this voluptuous yet perverse sensibility suggested the dawn of a Chinese *Décadisme*, signaling the completion of an exotic journey from De Musset to des Esseintes, Baudelaire to Bajou, from *mal du siècle* to *fin de siècle*.

Such acclamation was not simply an affirmation of Shao’s talent, but also a vote of confidence in the city itself. For the pro-urban intellectuals there was ample evidence to suggest that Shanghai was entering an exciting period of its development. In the years ahead,

<sup>3</sup> Leo Ou-fan Lee, *The romantic generation of modern Chinese writers* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973), p.248.

**Figure 2**

Cover illustration for Shao’s poetic début, *Paradise and May*



<sup>4</sup> Zhang Ruogu, "Wuyue de ougezhe: jieshao yige qingnian shiren" [A eulogist for May: introducing a young poet], in *Yiguo qingdiao* [Exotic atmospheres] (Shanghai: Shanghai Shijie Shuju, 1929; reprint ed., Hanyu Dacidian Chubanshe, 1996), p.162.

<sup>5</sup> Zhao Jingshen, "Bihui de yiqun" [The PEN clique], quoted in Li Guangde, "Shao Xunmei de shi yu shilun" [The poetry and poetic critiques of Shao Xunmei], *Huzhou shizhuan xuebao*, 1985.2: 2.

<sup>6</sup> Shao Xunmei, "Zixu" [Self-preface], in *Shi ershiwu shou* [Twenty-five poems] (Shanghai: Shidai Tushu Gongsi, 1936), pp.6–7.

<sup>7</sup> Zhang Ruogu, *Yiguo qingdiao*, p.160.

they would rhapsodize over this new landscape of skyscrapers, parks, cafés, and cinemas, in the process creating one of the most enduring clichés associated with the city: the Paris of the Orient. There was also a sincere belief that through their literary endeavours they would effect the transformation of this city into a new cultural capital modeled on a nineteenth-century European prototype. Shao became an icon precisely because he seemed to exude the very sophistication so desperately required by this metropolis in the making.

Even to the most urbane of his peers, there was something terribly alien about Shao's verse with its references to pagan poets and Christian deities, its sexually explicit metaphors and preoccupation with sin. Yet this *exotisme* was not limited to Shao's creative imagination; it appeared to be an integral aspect of his personality. For many, Shao was not simply inspired by the Occident but rather was of it, prompting one commentator to classify him as a "foreign poet."<sup>4</sup> As if to vindicate this claim, physical descriptions of Shao focused upon what was surely his most Western feature, namely, his large nose. It was only to be expected that a man compared to a "classical male beauty of Ancient Greece" should have found inspiration in the birthplace of Western civilization.<sup>5</sup>

Coming ashore at Napoli, I went to the museum where I was stopped in my tracks by the mystic beauty of a fresco depicting the Greek poetess Sappho. I searched and searched until I found a copy of her poems in English, and

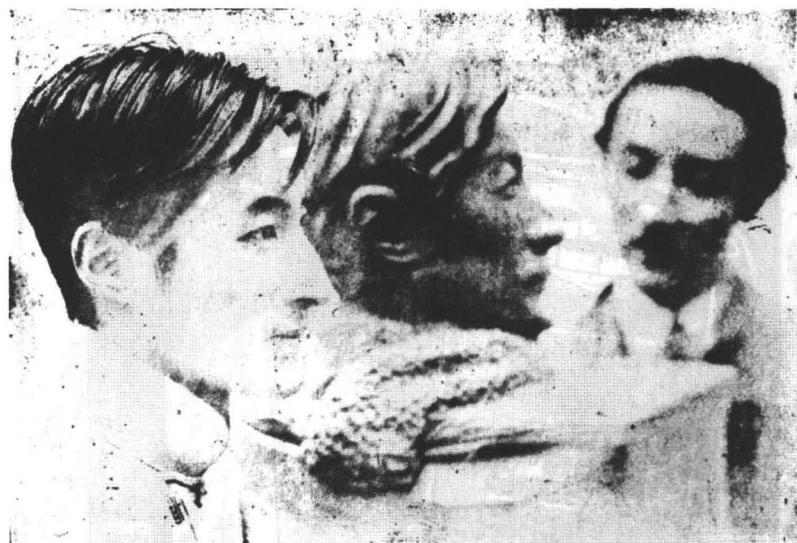
reading them I felt that in many respects they were similar to classical Chinese poems. For someone of such a weak spirit as myself, this was truly an amazing discovery.<sup>6</sup>

This epiphany had come in 1923 at the beginning of Shao's journey to Europe. He was just seventeen years old at the time. By the end of this four-year odyssey, which included stints at Cambridge and the École des Beaux Arts in Paris, Shao had completed what would become *Paradise and May*. Here, the reader could follow on the page the author's peregrinations with each poem completed in some new and exciting locale:

... Paris, London ... drifting on the Red Sea, the Mediterranean, the China Sea, the Indian Ocean, alongside his male and female classmates at Cambridge University, on a visit to the MUSEN DE LOUVRE [*sic*] ...<sup>7</sup>

### Figure 3

*The classical beauty: bust of Shao by Jiang Xiaojian 蔣小鵷 in Shanghai Sketch (Shanghai manhua 上海漫畫), no.51 (13 April 1929) (source: Lu Jianxin, ed., Shanghai manhua (Shanghai: Shanghai Shudian, 1996)*



But this foreign sojourn, an experience he shared with many of his generation, was not sufficient to single him out from his peers. Nor were the poems' stylistic borrowings, for what could be more common than to imitate a foreign literary figure currently in vogue? What truly separated Shao from his contemporaries was his complete ignorance of the Chinese literary scene.

My new poetry wasn't inspired by anyone. Only much later did I even read Hu Shi's *Experiments*. At school I used to read a lot of foreign poetry, which I translated into vernacular Chinese ... Even the name of Xu Zhimo, the greatest of all the new poets, meant nothing to me. My appallingly deficient general knowledge seems rather comical now. But, all the same, it was precisely because of this that my poetry was never exposed to any bad influence.<sup>8</sup>

To his admirers, Shao's literary persona was unique. Conceived in a vacuum, fed on a diet of foreign verse, then brought to life under a Mediterranean sun, Shao served as their bridge to the alien cultural traditions and literary deities they so revered.

### *Anglo-decadence and Adolescent Angst*

It is likely that Xu Zhimo intended the comparison with the godfather of the French Decadence to serve as a marker of the artistic terrain rather than a comment on any stylistic resemblance. As a future patron and fellow Anglophile, Xu knew full well that Shao's foremost literary model originated on the other side of the English Channel.

The route my poetry has taken is truly peculiar. From Sappho I uncovered her acolyte, Swinburne; and through Swinburne I became aware of the works of the Pre-Raphaélite school. From there I came in contact with the works of Baudelaire and Verlaine ...<sup>9</sup>

For the Shanghai intellectual of the late 1920s there was much to find attractive in Swinburne's life. This one figure exemplified the revolutionary spirit rebelling against all autocratic political systems and moral hypocrisy. He was a romantic figure whose acute understanding of the human condition drove him to drink, and a notorious man of letters whose works could cause a public outcry yet influence an entire generation. It was only to be expected that Swinburne would become a pivotal figure not simply in Shao's poetic career but also in the construction of his literary persona.

To Shao, like so many English schoolboys before him, Swinburne promised a new wisdom. This wisdom was to be found in the titillating world of sin, perversity, corruption and exquisite refinement; in short, the "dangerous" world of Baudelaire. In 1928, Shao published what can be regarded as the closest thing to a Chinese manifesto of decadence, its title inspired by a Swinburne poem, "Fire and Flesh" (*Huo yu rou* 火與肉), printed in a suitably elegant edition by his own Golden Chamber publishing house.<sup>10</sup> A surprising

<sup>8</sup> Shao Xunmei, *Shi ershiwu shou*, p.2.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p.7.

<sup>10</sup> Shao Xunmei, *Huo yu rou* (Shanghai: Jinwu Shudian, 1928). The inspiration for this title is reputedly the line by Swinburne, "Hands that sting like fire."

<sup>11</sup> Shao Xunmei, *Hua yiban de zui'e* [Flower-like evil] (Shanghai: Jinwu Shudian, 1929).

omission from this panegyric, which included essays on Sappho, Swinburne, Verlaine and George Moore, was Baudelaire. Yet, while he failed to complete his essay on this literary icon in time for inclusion in this collection, Shao accorded him the ultimate compliment when a revised edition of *Paradise and May* appeared that year under the title, *Flower-like Evil* (Hua yiban de zui'e 花一般的罪惡), a homage to Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal*.<sup>11</sup>

In Shao's eyes at least, Swinburne and Baudelaire were artistic equals. Both *Poems and Ballads* (1866) and *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857) were for him

**Figure 4**

*Decadent chic: the Republican fascination with decadence extended beyond the literary world to the visual arts. The preoccupation with the femme fatale and the end of civilization would soon become major motifs used by Shanghai artists in their portrayal of the city as an urban dystopia (source: Shanghai Sketch, no.62 [9 June 1929])*



works of genius capable of “liberating a culture imprisoned by religious, ethical and social mores.”<sup>12</sup> Yet for Shao, the poetic truths derived from this descent into moral turpitude had a decidedly Anglo-Saxon slant. The metaphysical inquiry of Baudelaire was secondary to the cult of artifice and the concomitant artistic snobbery of the *ultraraffiné* intellectual. The Swinburnian variety of decadence therefore offered intoxication but demanded only the pretence of extremity. As Christopher Isherwood recalls, the spiritual descendants of Swinburne were alive and well at Cambridge in the early 1920s when undergraduates armed with Baudelaire unlocked a world of “... l'affreuse Juive (the repugnant Jewess), opium, absinthe, negresses, Lesbos and the metamorphoses of the Vampire. Sexual love was the torture chamber, the loathsome charnel-house, the bottomless abyss. The one valid sexual pleasure was to be found in the consciousness of doing evil ...”<sup>13</sup>

This affectation of immorality was obviously the perfect vehicle for expressing adolescent angst.<sup>14</sup> Just as Swinburne's verse reveals a preoccupation with de Sade, masochism and the *femme fatale*, so Shao's poetry displayed a pubescent fixation with “wet, soft flesh,” serpents and deflowered virgins.

Ah, lusty May is again burning,  
A sin is born of a virgin's kiss;  
Sweet tears tempt me, always tempt me,  
To feel between her breasts with my quivering  
lips.

— From “May”

You are perfume awakened from a fiery bed,  
Your naked virgin's body like a bright moon,  
In your flesh I see not a cover of fiery blood,  
But a rose which blooms in my heart.

— From “To Sappho”

I am a loyal disciple of sin,  
I wish to see a worldly nun disrobe.

— From “Sweet Dream”

Clearly, Shao represented the very antithesis of the frustrated and sexually dysfunctional intellectual, an image propagated in the highly successful fiction of Yu Dafu 郁達夫. Wealthy, good-looking and married to a celebrated beauty (his childhood sweetheart, Sheng Peiyu 盛佩玉, whom he wed in

<sup>12</sup> Shao Xunmei, *Huo yu rou*, pp.19–20.

<sup>13</sup> Christopher Isherwood, *Lions and shad-ows* (London: Minerva Paperbacks, 1996), p.22.

<sup>14</sup> Richard Gilman, *Decadence: the strange life of an epithet* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1975), p.118.

Figure 5

After Beardsley: “Salome” by Shao's close friend and colleague, Ye Qiannyu 葉淺予 (source: Shanghai Sketch, no.36 [12 February 1928])



<sup>15</sup> Shao Xunmei, "Guanyu 'Hua yiban de zui'e' de piping" [Concerning the criticisms of *Flower-like evil*], in *Shibou* [Sphinx], vol.1, (revised issue, July 1928), pp.1–3.

<sup>16</sup> Shao Xunmei, *Huo yu rou*, p.26.

<sup>17</sup> Shen Congwen, *Xin wenxue daxi* [A compendium of new literature] (Shanghai: Liangyou Tushu Gongsi, 1935), vol.1, p.34.

<sup>18</sup> Shao Xunmei, "Zeiku yu shengmiao zhijian de xintu" [A believer caught between the thieves' den and the temple], in *Huo yu rou*, pp.51–9.

December 1927), Shao was free to revel in his sexual awakening, taking his verse into uncharted territory and setting himself on a collision course with the moral majority.

Shao's Swinburnean pose was certainly a success judging by the public response to *Flower-like Evil*, which echoed the reception of Swinburne's own *Poems and Ballads*. Robert Buchanan and John Morley were some of the many critics who had publicly castigated Swinburne for writing verse they considered unclean, morbid and sensual. Shao too, now found himself under attack from intellectuals across the political divide. A major criticism was that these works seemed unnecessarily obscure or devoid of meaning altogether. Still more of his contemporaries took issue with his overwhelming aestheticism which they believed harboured immoral and blatantly pornographic sentiments. Shao was ill-prepared for this barrage of verbal critiques, but nonetheless lashed out in print. Adopting a suitably lofty tone, he attacked his detractors as poorly read and emotionally deficient, stating that their remarks said more about their own deficient natures than about the work itself.<sup>15</sup>

In response to charges of immorality, Shao drew upon his earlier defence of Swinburne: "... poetry is poetry, and people are people and it doesn't do to confuse the two. Someone who writes immoral poetry is not necessarily immoral, while on the other hand the author of moral verse is not necessarily blessed with the same moral qualities. Attempting to determine a poet's moral character from his verse is simply preposterous."<sup>16</sup> The Nietzschean quality of genius that Shao identified in Swinburne's disregard for moral norms was obviously designed to protect his disciple from similar attacks. For a writer blessed with the ability to appreciate the beauty of both the Virgin Mary and the harlot Salome, the misreading of beauty as pornography was somewhat comic.

This preoccupation with beauty ensured that Shao would henceforth be associated with a motley collection of aesthetes, dandies, and Anglophiles. Yet surface similarities aside, Shao shared little in common with the likes of Li Jinfa 李金髮 or Liang Shiqiu 梁實秋. Ironically, it was the arch-enemy of the Shanghai literati, Shen Congwen 沈從文, who pinpointed the underlying principle of Shao's verse: "His poems are created from the emotional odes to the senses. They are in praise of beauty, and expressions of the hedonistic pleasures found within this aestheticism."<sup>17</sup> Shao shared Shen's assessment of his work, identifying himself like Verlaine before him as a hedonist rather than decadent or simply an aesthete.<sup>18</sup>

As Leo Ou-fan Lee has clearly shown, Shao's predisposition towards hedonism was tempered by the Chinese intellectuals' own understanding of decadence. Paradoxically, whilst many praised Baudelaire, few if any could identify with his critique of modernity which ran counter to their own unshakeable faith in the notion of progress. The solution, as formulated by Xu Zhimo, China's earliest advocate of Baudelaire, was an extravagant perspective on his works that enhanced the original with layers of theatricality, artful alienation and role-play—in short, a vision of Baudelaire heralded by Gautier and one that was firmly entrenched in European literary circles by

the beginning of the Yellow Nineties. As the success of Shao demonstrates, aesthetic hedonism rather than Baudelaire's nihilism was more in tune with the intellectual tastes of late 1920s Shanghai.<sup>19</sup>

More importantly, if hedonism as Shao himself suggests is the most extreme form of individualism, then it was this trait that help stamp his personality on what might otherwise be considered more highly derivative verse. Hedonism alone, however, does not explain the success of Shao's Swinburnean pose. Others had attempted similar feats (most notably Wang Duqing's 王敦慶 claim to be the Chinese Byron) only to be met with ridicule. Shao's *épater les bourgeois* sensibility worked precisely because he was of neither bourgeois nor peasant stock. As Zhang Ruogu 張若谷 wrote in his introductory essay on Shao, he was "... the young master who lives peacefully in his ivory tower. His is a life of leisure. He is a 'prince of pleasure' who enjoys both high position and creature comforts."<sup>20</sup> This aristocratic lineage was to lend his poetry a certain degree of legitimacy. It also informed the complex relationship with his peers whose feelings ranged from admiration and envy to violent hatred.

### *Noblesse Oblige*

In one of the many fictionalized accounts of her relationship with Shao Xunmei, the American journalist and author, Emily Hahn, writes of how Shao's father once "tried to buy a rather small white elephant from a visiting circus to give to Heh-ven (Xunmei), who was then four years old."<sup>21</sup> While this somewhat romantic tale was designed to conjure up the exotic Orient for the readers of *The New Yorker*, it is nonetheless indicative of Shao's privileged and somewhat unconventional upbringing.

By the time of Xunmei's birth in 1906, the Shao clan was considered one of the city's best families. They were traditional gentry whose family seat remained the town of Yuyao 餘姚 in neighbouring Zhejiang province. The family could also boast of having several generations of distinguished service in officialdom to their credit. It was his grandfather, Shao Youlian 邵友濂, who moved the family to the booming treaty port. Once a Qing envoy to Tsarist Russia, Youlian now set about forging strong alliances with two of the greatest merchant-gentry families the city has ever known. For his eldest son, he arranged a suitable match with the

<sup>19</sup> Leo Ou-fan Lee, *Shanghai modern: the flowering of a new urban culture in China 1930-1945* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), p.241.

<sup>20</sup> Zhang Ruogu, *Yiguo qingdiao*, p.63.

<sup>21</sup> Emily Hahn, "Richlieu in Shanghai." This was one of Hahn's many articles for *The New Yorker* collected in the volume *Mr Pan* (London: Robert Hale, 1942), p.14.

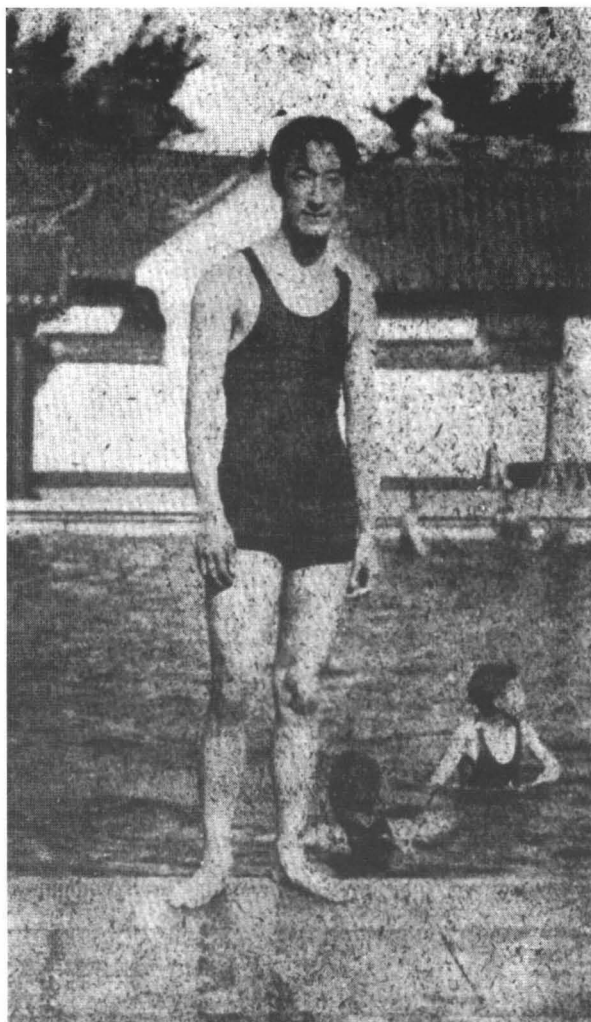
**Figure 6**

*The Young Master relaxes at the Shao family estate on Bubbling Well Road, date unknown (photo courtesy of Shao Yang 邵陽)*



**Figure 7**

*The celebrity-scholar: a fixture of gossip columns since adolescence, Shao's image frequently appeared in the social pages of Shanghai's growing number of lifestyle publications (source: Shanghai Sketch, no.68 [10 August 1929])*



<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p.14. Emily Hahn used her 'father-in-law's' hijinks as the inspiration for many of her *New Yorker* columns, including "Only the Chinese" and "The promised land." It is also worth noting that Shao was somewhat annoyed that Emily allowed his father to upstage his own character, Pan Heh-ven.

daughter of the city's foremost statesman and powerbroker, Li Hongzhang 李鴻章. Shortly after, his younger son Shao Heng 邵恆 married into the family of the wealthy industrialist Sheng Xuanhuai 盛宣懷.

Born Shao Yunlong 邵雲龍, Xunmei was the eldest of Shao Heng's seven children. Living in the family's large estate on Bubbling Well Road (Jing'an si lu 靜安寺路), the young master enjoyed the best of all worlds: a large staff of domestics to cater to his every whim and the luxury of a private education. Only when his uncle died without an heir did Shao stand to inherit the family's considerable assets. Yet even without this elevation in rank, Shao might have expected a life free from financial worry. Instead, as head of the family, he was to witness this fortune all but disappear in the space of a few short but tumultuous years. Still, such tragedy was unforeseeable and, to his adoring family, the prospects for their golden child seemed particularly bright. He would read political economy at Cambridge, return to China and rise to a position of importance in either government or business. In formulating these careful plans, his elders failed to take into account the young Shao's similarities to his increasingly eccentric father. A former Governor of Taiwan and later Mayor of Shanghai, Shao Heng was by now enjoying his retirement largely at the expense of the family coffers. By the time Shao met Emily Hahn in 1935 his father's misbehaviour had become the stuff of family legend: the trail of gambling debts across the city, the countless IOUs in his children's names and the attempt to pawn the family lands to a debt collector. As Hahn wrote:

He is a rake, but his ways are not the ways of the Shanghai rakes I have met, who dance at the Majestic and the Paramount, who play tennis and speak English with each other, and go to Paris once in a while, and take their favourite wives out. Heh-ven's father is an old-fashioned, die-hard rake, and he wins and loses large sums speculating, and smokes opium, and makes his concubines stay at home.<sup>22</sup>

Just as his father was the apotheosis of the Shanghai rake, so Shao was, in his youth, the forerunner of the new Shanghai dandy. Dressed in his purple tweed suit, Shao could be seen dashing around town in one of the family's two automobiles: a brown Nash or a sporty red roadster. Private automobiles, like tweed suits, were still an unheard of luxury, and Shao was understandably a major presence on what was the city's fledgling social circuit. Known

throughout Shanghai's celebrated pleasure quarters, Shao also entertained lavishly in the best restaurants where he displayed a prodigious knowledge of Chinese and Western cuisine. As was expected of all Shanghai millionaires, Shao maintained a box at the theatre and his every appearance with his then favourite sing-song girl in tow was routinely noted by the voracious mosquito press. It was the young master's first brush with fame.

In 1923, the gossip-hungry Shanghai public became fascinated by Shao's great passion for the famous actress and renowned beauty, White Lotus (Bai Lian 白蓮). This great affair ended in a suitably melodramatic fashion with Shao's involvement with the notorious *femme fatale*, known simply by her English name, Prudence. More scandalous headlines followed with Shao's arrest for the murder of another of Prudence's numerous admirers. Though it was later proven to be a case of mistaken identity, Shao's incarceration lent him a certain cachet, and in the years to come he would boast that whilst in jail he had learnt of four ways to commit a murder.<sup>23</sup>

Such romantic liaisons continued during his sojourn abroad. In Cambridge, where he lodged with The Revd and Mrs Moule, Shao found time to develop a sentimental friendship with Lucy, the daughter of a neighbouring farmer. In Paris he embarked upon still more amorous adventures. Dressed in a slouch hat and old clothes, Shao headed straight to the Latin Quarter where he assumed the role of the poor student in pursuit of love. His dashing looks and substantial purse made Shao exceedingly popular with the *demi-mondaines*, who by his own account dubbed him "*le beau jeunesse homme*."<sup>24</sup> Years later, Shao would recall these halcyon days in his fictional sketch "Josephine." Here, the "poet who eulogized May" now does the same for the charms of French women, from their golden tresses to their feline temperaments. The informed reader was well aware that this romantic tale of a young peasant from Bourg-la-Reine and her Chinese beau was decidedly autobiographical.<sup>25</sup> While such dalliances far from home might be excused, even admired, any relationship with a foreign woman whilst on Chinese soil was considered, even by the most enlightened intellectual, unthinkable. Still, Shao would flout all moral tenets, be they Eastern or Western, traditional or modern, by his scandalous 'marriage' to the American journalist and good-time girl, Emily 'Mickey' Hahn.

*... I do love that little bastard, but it's like playing marbles with quicksilver*<sup>26</sup>

— Emily Hahn on Shao Xunmei

At the time of their 'marriage' in 1937, Hahn believed that her frequently rocky three-year relationship with Shao was all but over. Deeply attracted to an Englishman and uncertain about her own prospects in war-torn China,

<sup>23</sup> Emily Hahn, "Jailbird," in *Mr Pan*, p.156.

<sup>24</sup> Emily Hahn, *Steps of the sun* (London: Robert Hale, 1940), p.22.

<sup>25</sup> Shao Xunmei, "Josephine," *Zhenmeishan* 2.2 (1929).

#### Figure 8

*The affair that shocked Shanghai: a portrait of Shao's American 'wife', Emily Hahn. When their relationship became public knowledge, several Western women reputedly approached Hahn for a discreet introduction to her Chinese lover (source: frontispiece from Hahn's 1940 novel Steps of the Sun)*



<sup>26</sup> Ken Cuthbertson, *Nobody said not to go: the life, loves and adventures of Emily Hahn* (Boston: Faber & Faber, 1998), p.163.

<sup>27</sup> Hahn, *Steps of the sun*, p.103.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p.53.

<sup>29</sup> Emily Hahn, *The Soong sisters* (New York: Doubleday, Doran, 1941).

Hahn later admitted that her marriage was as much for convenience as for love. While their union only became common knowledge years later, their relationship was very much in the public eye from day one. No stickler for convention herself, Hahn was a seasoned adventurer and a veteran of numerous romantic entanglements. This young girl from St Louis had rebelled at an early age, becoming the first woman to study the exclusively male discipline of mining engineering at the University of Wisconsin. Later, at the height of the Great Depression, Hahn, by then an aspiring author, began a string of fiery romances that would take her first to Manhattan, then Europe, on to the forests of the Belgian Congo and finally to the exotic Orient. Even after her affair with Shao ended, the scandals continued as Hahn, now in Hong Kong, bore a child out of wedlock to Charles Boxer, then a married man and the local head of the British secret service.

It was only to be expected that following her arrival in Shanghai in 1935, Hahn continued to “defy every law of decency” by conducting a very open affair with the widely despised financier, Sir Victor Sassoon.<sup>27</sup> Yet not even

this *affaire du coeur* could prepare the expatriate community for the shock of Emily’s “native passion.” From the very outset this affair, which began shortly after their first meeting in the spring of that year, promised to be an emotional tempest. Not for the first time, Hahn found herself embroiled in a classic love triangle, this time with a notorious womanizer and his patient yet jealous wife, Sheng Peiyu, now heavily pregnant with their sixth child. Shao’s and Hahn’s ‘marriage’ took place against the backdrop of war and during a personal crisis for Mickey. Knowing that this slip of paper drawn up by Shao would never be recognized under U.S. law, Hahn opted for the security marriage might offer. In a drastic turnaround for the fiercely independent woman, Hahn now contemplated not only moving into the Shao household but also the possibility of having his child.

Throughout this tumultuous affair, Shao was more than just a “considerate and experienced lover.”<sup>28</sup> Humorous and cultured, Shao was also a business partner who offered Hahn stimulating work, editing and writing for several of his admittedly short-lived publications, such as *Candid Comment* and *Tian Xia* 天下, an English-language journal which featured works by many of China’s intellectual and literary stars. It was also through Shao’s extensive connections that she gained access to the elusive Soong family, and was able to write her best-selling biography of China’s new political dynasty, *The Soong Sisters*.<sup>29</sup> More importantly,

**Figure 9**

“One of the world’s greatest love stories”—cover illustration from *Steps of the Sun*, Emily Hahn’s fictionalised account of her affair with Shao and her awkward relationship with Number One wife, Sheng Peiyu



the man who introduced her to the delights of opium also provided her with insight into the mysteries of the “real China.” Hahn’s apartment in Kiangsi Road (江西路, a notorious red-light district) quickly became yet another salon for Shao. In addition to frequent visits from members of her new extended family, Hahn now came into contact with “... poets, artists, teachers and intellectuals ... . Occasional visitors included the Communist guerrilla leader Mao Tse-tung and his spokesman ... Chou En-lai 周恩來 ...,” not to mention a dapper young gentleman she later learnt to be Chiang Kai-shek’s chief “hit man.”<sup>30</sup> But real “Chinamen” were not always prepared for Mickey. Zhang Kebiao 章克標 was so intimidated by her “uninhibited behaviour” that this leading decadent author and essayist decided against renewing their acquaintance.<sup>31</sup> Zhang’s caution was not ill-advised as Hahn was not above satirizing the more pretentious of these intellectuals in her *New Yorker* columns. In “Cathay and the Muse,” Hahn wrote of a Mr Shakespeare who frequently corrected her English pronunciation, along with the various Chinese incarnations of Baudelaire (all confirmed opium smokers), Chesterton, Eliot, Faulkner, and several Henry Jameses.<sup>32</sup>

Over the years, Hahn wrote extensively about their relationship. Shao appeared as Pan Heh-ven in her comic studies for *The New Yorker*, as Sun Yui-long in the fictionalized account of their affair, *Steps of the Sun*, and under his own name (romanized as Sinmay Zau) in her memoirs of this period, *China to Me: A Partial Autobiography*. Still, Hahn remained puzzled by the many inconsistencies in Shao’s character. He seemed oblivious to what Hahn regarded as a double standard, and once lambasted a female relative after her arrest for consorting with a foreigner.<sup>33</sup> To Hahn, it was inconceivable that a man who appeared so thoroughly urbane could at times behave like a textbook conservative. Yet, it was these very contradictions which defined the nature and limitations of Shao’s cosmopolitanism. Raised in an environment that offered the best of both Orient and Occident, Shao was the very definition of Shanghai Modern: at home with the world, yet thoroughly Chinese.

Shao’s worldliness was, however, quite genuine and not simply an academic appreciation or a mannerism like that assumed by so many of his peers. Throughout his life he remained a staunch opponent of feigned modernity and disdained overseas Chinese for their deplorable habit of speaking English together. And in stark contrast to the new urban dandies who wore their modernity on their sleeves, Shao had long since

<sup>30</sup> Cuthbertson, *Nobody said not to go*, p. 146.

<sup>31</sup> Zhang Kebiao, “Haishang caizi gao chuban – ji Shao Xunmei” [A Shanghai talent takes up publishing: remembering Shao Xunmei], *Shanghai wenshi* 2 (1989): 8.

<sup>32</sup> Hahn, *Mr Pan*, pp. 18–22. Shakespeare was probably a parody of Wen Yuaning 溫源甯, a graduate of Cambridge, whom Hahn described as “more British than the British themselves.” See Emily Hahn, *China to me: a partial autobiography* (New York: De Capo Press, 1975), p. 15.

<sup>33</sup> Hahn, *Mr Pan*, p. 62.

**Figure 10**

*Shao as Mr Pan, the eccentric central character in Emily Hahn’s highly popular articles for The New Yorker. Though delighted with the success of these articles, Shao occasionally complained to Hahn that she made him appear “like an idiot”*



hung up his dinner suit in favour of more traditional garb. Even in the rarified atmosphere of the Hong Kong Hotel (香港飯店), Shao stunned the few Chinese present by appearing in a shabby brown scholar's gown. To all intents and purposes, he was the very portrait of the conservative scholar, one who constantly threatened to grow a pigtail and forget all his English. But unlike his contemporaries lost in the city between two worlds, Shao found himself equally comfortable in both. While this East–West fusion was to make Shao the toast of the city's “integrated” dinner parties, it also earned him powerful enemies within the Chinese literary sphere.

### *Literary Amateur and Professional Son-in-Law*

<sup>34</sup> Publication details for *Sphinx* are somewhat sketchy. However, it is known that following Shao's involvement with the periodical, a revised version appeared fortnightly between July and December 1928 published by Shao's Golden Chamber bookstore. This was ultimately superseded by *The Golden Chamber Monthly*, edited by both Shao and Zhang Kebiao and which ran from January 1929 until September 1930.

<sup>35</sup> Zhang Kebiao, “Haishang caizi gao chuban – ji Shao Xunmei,” p.5.

When Shao arrived back in Shanghai from his European escapades in 1926, he brought with him aspirations of becoming a poet but few of the credentials needed to survive in the changing artistic climate. Fame, he quickly discovered, was fleeting and as the tide slowly turned in favour of a more proletarian chic, his upbringing, once a source of pride, would prove to be a distinct disadvantage.

From the outset, many of Shao's earliest collaborators were skeptical about his commitment to the world of letters. His foray into the cut-throat world of Shanghai publishing began with the literary journal *Sphinx* (Shihou 獅吼).<sup>34</sup> Acquiring a copy of the magazine in Singapore, Shao was deeply impressed by its heavy “art for art's sake” bias and Beardsley-inspired illustrations by Lu Shihou 盧世侯 which appealed to his own *fin-de-siècle* tastes. Once back in Shanghai he quickly volunteered his services, beginning what would become a ten-year working relationship with the magazine's editor and aspiring novelist, Zhang Kebiao. Initially, Zhang also believed this interest in publishing was little more than a rich man's folly and Shao's first solo venture, *The Golden Chamber Monthly* (Jinwu yuekan 金屋月刊), did little to dispel his doubts. It was modelled upon the notorious *Yellow Book* and published from a small but lavishly-decorated office directly opposite the Shao family residence. With a print-run of 2000, the journal (like many subsequent ventures) failed to sell and years later unsold copies still gathered dust in the family storehouse.<sup>35</sup>

Long after the family fortune had evaporated, Shao was still associated with these deluxe publications and cursed by the epithet of tycoon. But while his persistence and generosity won over many potential enemies, Shao failed to make an impression on his most powerful adversary. This was none other than Lu Xun, the leading writer of the New Culture movement and icon of the Left, whose scarifying essays were capable of destroying literary reputations. Lu Xun's campaign against the “self-declared poet” took many forms. He refused to contribute to any journal associated with Shao and attacked the author's work both in his personal correspondence and in print.

There is a saying: “to make one’s way in the literary world one requires a wealthy wife, an inheritance, and no fear of legal action.” ... Best of all, a rich wife with even richer parents. That way you can use the dowry as literary capital. ... take the pampered son-in-law who, belittled by the family, enters the literary world with a great reputation ... studying portraits of Oscar Wilde, with his button-hole, his ivory-topped cane, he is such a vision ... . The old adage “within the pages one finds one’s very own golden chamber” now reads, “amidst the money one finds a littérateur.”<sup>36</sup>

To suggest that Shao purchased fame was unpleasant, but to imply that the money he used to scale the literary heights was not, in fact, his own was downright catty. But for Lu Xun, Shao was little more than the “pampered son-in-law” (*fujia zhuixu* 富家贅婿), implying that his marriage to Sheng Peiyu, the granddaughter of Shanghai’s wealthiest man, had helped him bankroll his literary career. In many senses, Shao courted such criticism through his often extravagant and always public lifestyle. The image of the struggling author living in a cramped attic had reached almost mythical proportions, and Shao’s lifestyle was completely detached from the day-to-day reality of his fellow Shanghai literati.<sup>37</sup> But if Shao’s self-funded enterprises may have been deemed unfashionable on both aesthetic and political grounds, his way of life remained fascinating even to his natural enemies.

### *Lifestyles of the Republican Rich and Famous*

If Shao’s life made regular by-lines in the gossip columns of the city’s mosquito press, then it was also perfect material for the style of “gossip literature” that abounded in the 1920s and 1930s. While much of this genre may well have contained more fantasy than fact, writing about Shao required no such leap of the imagination. To the casual observer, Shao might have stepped from the pages of a popular Mandarin Duck and Butterfly (*yuanyang budiepai* 鴛鴦蝴蝶派) novella, such as those by the highly popular author Zhang Henshui 張恨水 which chronicled the lives and loves of scholars, aristocrats and dilettantes. Instead, his life was handled in a more highbrow though equally ebullient fashion by one of his most ardent admirers, Zhang Ruogu.

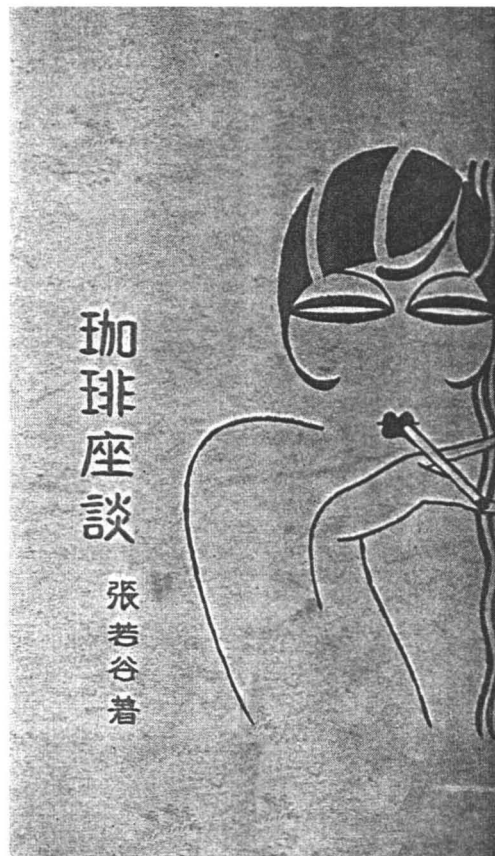
An active participant in the Francophile salon, Zhang was perhaps best known as the writer of delicate *feuilletons* which celebrated the romantic urban life of his imagination. Born and raised in the more humble surroundings of the Chinese city, Zhang was naturally impressed by a figure such as Shao. For Zhang, Shao represented more than simply aristocratic good taste. His friendship

<sup>36</sup> Lu Xun, “Denglong shu shiyi” [A supplement to ‘The art of success’], *Lu Xun quanji* [Complete works of Lu Xun] (Beijing: Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe, 1981), vol.5, pp.274–5.

<sup>37</sup> For an account of the life in the attic or ‘pavilion room’ (*tingzi jian* 亭子間) in Republican Shanghai see Hanchao Lu, *Beyond the neon lights: everyday Shanghai in the early twentieth century* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1999).

**Figure 11**

Cover of Zhang Ruogu’s *Café Confabulations* (*Kafei zuotan* 咖啡座談), an insider’s look at a few of the “great literary debates” waged in the salons of Shanghai, including five pages of correspondence between Shao and Zhang concerning the correct translation of the French term ‘confession’



<sup>38</sup> Zhang Ruogu, *Duhui jiaoxiangqu* [Urban symphony] (Shanghai: Zhenmeishan Shudian, 1929), pp.13–14. Zhang's fictional début not only featured an idealized portrait of his friend but was also dedicated to Shao.

<sup>39</sup> Shao Xunmei, "Shafo" [Sappho], in *Huo yu rou*, p.4.

<sup>40</sup> Emily Hahn, *Time and places* (New York: Cromwell, 1970), p.222. However, it is indicative that in 1930, after he returned to the newly-renovated family home, Shao shrugged off the family's monetary woes and commissioned Zhang Zhenyu to decorate his new study in splendid colours.

also provided the author with a connection to the European ideal that Zhang advocated in such works as *Exotic Atmospheres* (Yiguo qingdiao 異國情調), *La Vie Littéraire* (Wenxue shenghuo 文學生活), and *Café Confabulations*.

And so it is fitting that Zhang's sole attempt at fiction also included a thinly-veiled portrait of his friend and colleague. *Urban Symphony* (Duhui jiaoxiangqu 都會交響曲), as its title suggests, was yet another of Zhang's paeans to the new metropolis. The title story in this collection begins with an account of the city by night in which Zhang introduces the reader to some of his favourite haunts: the concert hall, the café and the city's most sumptuous literary salon.

The young master's residence is one of Shanghai's superior mansions. Built entirely in marble, surrounded by a large garden, and approached by eight pathways wide enough for automobiles, the estate looked like a manifestation of the eight hexagrams with a tall Western building in the middle. The centre of the house formed a hall magnificently decorated like an emperor's throne room, leading into two smaller yet beautifully appointed rooms; to the east a library and to the west a music room. And there was the host's private study, where he entertained guests. Here, too, the interior decoration was exceptionally opulent; there was an authentic bust of the poetess Sappho recently excavated in the volcanic city of Pompeii—this item alone was worth 5,000 dollars. Furthermore, there was a manuscript of the English poet Swinburne that had been acquired for 20,000 pounds in London. Their host led them into the music room along the walls of which hung portraits of the great composers. In the centre of the room stood a STEINWAY piano ... and right next to it there was a pile of music scores bound in jade-tinted snakeskin.<sup>38</sup>

The real life model for this salon was Shao's new family home on Jiaozhou Road (膠州路). A large brick building set amidst spacious gardens, this residence provided extra room for the ever-expanding family, and facilities to entertain his growing list of acquaintances within the artistic community. While it paled in comparison to Zhang's hyperbole, the young master's residence was still a showcase for treasures from the family home and artworks such as paintings by Zhang Daofan 張道藩 (a graduate of both the Slade School of Fine Arts and the École des Beaux Arts who went on to hold senior government and party posts in Nanking and Taiwan) and an oil by Ingres picked up during his stay in Paris.

In this respect, Shao preferred to present a more humble face to the world. His study, as described in his essay "Sappho," is that of the serious intellectual: a cramped room with only enough space for three bookcases, a desk and a few chairs.<sup>39</sup> Soon this Spartan decor would become the effect not of modesty but of economic necessity, as Shao sold off the few remaining family heirlooms to make ends meet. By the time Shao met Emily Hahn the family home was little more than a shell. "It was bare, as one could see at a glance because the doors stood open between rooms—no carpets, no wallpaper, very little furniture ..."<sup>40</sup>

**Figure 12**

*Immortalised as the city's most exclusive literary salon in Zhang Ruogu's Urban Symphony, this large Western-style villa on Jiaozhou Road served briefly as Shao's home in the late 1920s (photo courtesy of Shao Yang)*

In contrast to Zhang's dreams of golden chambers and *chambres séparée*, the Shanghai salon was quite mundane. But then reality was rarely on Zhang's agenda. *Urban Symphonies*, like much of his other work, sought to create a cult of literary celebrity similar to that enjoyed by European writers in the nineteenth century. In Shao, Zhang found his paragon: the Bright Young Thing, the man of letters, and more importantly the living embodiment of Shanghai chic. Shao seemingly had little difficulty in living up to this image. In the late 1920s, while still the darling of the literary scene, he was already making his mark on the city's salon circuit. Still, it would take more than his dramatic arrival at the wheel of his automobile to impress the serious intellectual. Instead, his puckish wit, irreverence, and ability to amuse would win him friends not only in many sectors of the fragmented literary world but also in society.

### *The Social A-List*

Ironically, Shao achieved literary celebrity just as the Chinese cultural world reached crisis point. The North–South cultural divide had deepened still further, while in Shanghai itself, the city’s intellectuals were now at each other’s throats. Yet Shao would emerge from the ensuing *mêlée* relatively unscathed. His unlikely survival can, in part, be attributed to his friendships with prominent literary figures from across the political spectrum. These alliances were forged early in his career as Shao set about conquering the salons of Shanghai.

**Figure 13**

*Photograph of Shao and Sheng Peiyu at the time of their engagement, Shanghai 1923 (photo courtesy of Shao Xiaobong 邵綽紅)*



The occasion of Shao’s marriage to his cousin Sheng Peiyu in December 1927 illustrates how quickly Shao became acquainted with the intellectual *élite*. After a service at the Majestic Hotel, where Shao and his bride wore costumes of the groom’s design, the couple returned for a more traditional ceremony at the family home. Only later that month did Shao hold a reception for his friends from the literary and artistic milieux. Though it had been less than a year since his poetic *début*, the guest list was nonetheless crammed with such notable figures as Liu Haisu 劉海粟, Huang Jiyuan 黃濟遠, Chang Yu 常玉, Zhang Guangyu 張光宇, Ding Song 丁悚, Zhang Kebiao 張可彪 and Xu Zhimo. The predominance of painters at this gathering suggests that at this early date Shao was far better connected with the city’s bustling art scene than the literary set. Many of these friendships had been forged in Paris a few years earlier when, *en route* to Cambridge, Shao enrolled at the *École des Beaux Arts* in Paris. Fortunate to arrive at a time when many of the most talented new Chinese artists were serving their apprenticeship abroad, Shao was quick to become acquainted with those at the heart of the Sino-Parisian art scene. An art-lover but not a serious artist, Shao was nonetheless a founding member of the

artistic brotherhood known as the Celestial Hound Society (Tiangou hui 天狗會) alongside Xie Shoukang 謝壽康, Xu Beihong 徐悲鴻, and Zhang Daofan.

Shao was to prove just as successful in his attempts to befriend the literary giants. With patronage from Xu Zhimo and Zhang Ruogu, Shao quickly became a familiar face at the city’s literary get-togethers. He was now regularly spotted at the weekly gatherings on the second floor of the Xinya Teahouse (新雅茶室) in Sichuan Road (四川路). This was the city’s most lively and eclectic literary salon where on any given day one could encounter such established authors and poets as Fang Xin 芳信, Zhou Daxiong 周大雄,

**Figure 14**

*Art for art's sake: Shao with fellow members of the Celestial Hound Society at the École des Beaux Arts in Paris, 1925. Pictured from left: Zhang Daofan, Shao Xunmei, Liu Jiwen 劉紀文 Chang Yu, and Xie Shoukang*

Fu Yanchang 傅彥長, Li Qingyan 李青岩, Zhao Jingshen 趙景深, Ye Qiuyuan 葉秋源 and Yu Dafu.<sup>41</sup>

There was also a warm welcome for Shao in the salon of Shanghai's Francophiles. With his love of the French classics, Shao had much in common with the authors and translators who frequented cafés like the Balkan Milk House (Baergan niurudian 巴爾幹牛乳店) and congregated at the home of Zeng Pu in the Rue Massenet (馬斯南路). Contact with the Francophiles proved highly productive for Shao, resulting in a series of collaborations with Zhang Ruogu and contributions for the salon's journal, *Zhenmeishan* 真美善 (literally, "Truth, Beauty, Goodness"). Edited by Zeng Pu and his son, Xubai, *Zhenmeishan* survived despite its limited appeal, and from the Zengs Shao learnt many valuable lessons that he would soon need to survive in the increasingly competitive marketplace.

However, Shao's greatest contribution to the Francophile salon may well have been a prank that played itself out in the pages of *Zhenmeishan*. The trigger was the publication of Zeng Pu's translation of *Aphrodite*, a work of *fin de siècle* "pornography" by Pierre Louys. Haunted by the ghosts of his past, the seriously ill Zeng had lamented to Shao that Chinese women had yet to develop the passionate nature of an Aphrodite. Hoping to revive Zeng's flagging spirits, Shao wrote to him under the guise of Liu Wuxin 劉舞心, a Catholic schoolgirl who claimed to be an enthusiastic admirer of *Aphrodite*. Written in a delicate hand on violet paper, this ardent epistle had the desired effect and Zeng published both this and his floral reply in the next issue of

<sup>41</sup> Sheng Peiyu, "Wo yu Shao Xunmei" [Shao Xunmei and I], *Huzhou shifan xuebao*, 1985.2: 72.

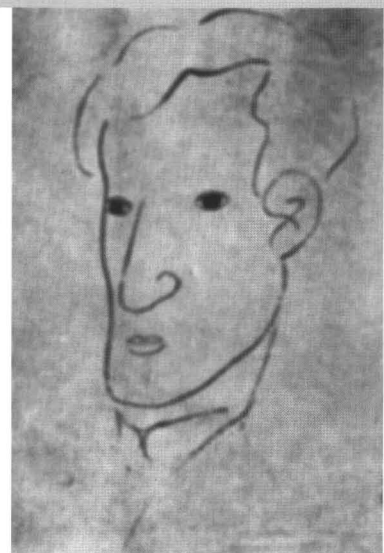
<sup>42</sup> Zeng Xubai, "Shao Xunmei yu Liu Wuxin" (Shao Xunmei and Liu Wuxin) in *Zhuanji wenxue* 54.2 (1989): 85–92. For the correspondence between Zeng and Miss Liu see *Zhenmeishan* 2.2 (1929): 1–9.

the journal. News of Zeng's new "romance" quickly filtered out into the literary community, and the sales of the next few issues containing their correspondence sky-rocketed. Miss Liu's familiarity with "obscure" European authors and her ability to quote the works of poets such as Theodore de Banville naturally aroused suspicion in the Francophile circle and at various times Shao, Zhao Jingsheng and Xu Weinan 徐蔚南 were all suspected of perpetrating a hoax. Shao went to extraordinary lengths to avoid discovery. In order to rekindle the belief in the girl's existence, Shao enlisted the help of his cousin, asking her to impersonate Miss Liu and hand-deliver a letter to the offices of *Zhenmeishan*. Shortly thereafter, Shao sent Zeng a novel penned by Miss Liu, entitled *Consolation* (Anwei 安慰) which would ultimately find its way into a special edition of *Zhenmeishan* dedicated to the works of modern women writers. But as Zeng's passion for Miss Liu grew stronger, Shao decided to put an end to this deceit. A final letter from Miss Liu stated that owing to ill health she had now moved to Suzhou and did not know when, if ever, she might return to Shanghai.<sup>42</sup>

Recalling the Miss Liu hoax years later, Shao remarked that such hijinks were considered a creative exercise in the Shanghai salon of the late 1920s. Yet, this penchant for pranks was soon at odds with the heated stylistic debates and political confrontations that characterized the increasingly acrimonious literary arena. That same year, Shen Congwen made the first attack in his now legendary campaign against the mercenary Shanghai litterateur sparking a cultural catfight that would rage throughout the coming decade and eventually polarize the literary world. By 1930, there was also a powerful new force in literary circles, one that had little time for Shao's displays of bourgeois humour. Shao soon discovered he was no longer one of the taste-determining élite, and could only watch as the League of Left-

### Figure 15

*The Decadent Fan Club: some of the prominent literary figures who helped advance Shao's fledgling poetic career. From left: Zeng Pu, Zhang Ruogu, Xu Zhimo and Zhang Kebiao (recent photo)*



Wing Writers (Zuoyi zuojia lianmeng 左翼作家聯盟) now set the cultural agenda for the new decade. Still, despite his love of serious intellectual debate and regardless of the risk of aesthetic isolation, Shao, the born entertainer, never once missed an opportunity to lighten the tone.

*"Villagers Please Do Not Fuck. Here Lies Pearl Buck"*<sup>43</sup>

— Shao's epitaph for the Nobel laureate

Shao's *bon mot* was as clever as it was vulgar. Referring to the fact that Western cemeteries were commonly used as nocturnal meeting places by Chinese lovers, it illustrated not only the huge cultural divide separating Orient from Occident, but also the differing verdicts on the Nobel Laureate's literary worth. For the Chinese intellectual, the critical acclaim for Buck's *oeuvre* in the West was completely unwarranted and the coarseness of Shao's remark merely expressed their disdain for the popular author's brand of chinoiserie.

Though his Western audience was amused by such witticisms, they were just as likely to be his victims. Shao frequently displayed his passion for "pulling the foreigner's leg" at the soirées of the noted *taitai* 太太 and doyenne of Shanghai society, Bernadine Szold-Fritz. Here, Shao would indulge his hostess's passion for local culture with impromptu displays of opera, *t'ai-ch'i* and Peking puppets. Only the few Chinese present were aware that such performances were utter nonsense and derived great pleasure from Szold-Fritz's obvious delight.<sup>44</sup> But if Shao was one of the very few Chinese intellectuals who could move with relative ease between the 'native' and 'expatriate' communities, he was never the 'token Chinese'. No

matter what the gathering, Shao always gravitated towards centre-stage.

Considering his perceived cosmopolitanism, it is not surprising that Shao also became a leading light in the Chinese branch of the international writers' association, PEN.<sup>45</sup> Rather than simply being another forum for ponderous intellectual debate, PEN also offered the opportunity for more social get-togethers. For Shao, this was simply another stage on which to shine and if the recollections of Zhao Jingshen are to be trusted, then at least on one occasion, Shao put in an admirable performance.

At one gathering at the Meiyuan 梅園, Shao Xunmei was particularly entertaining. He had invited along a number

<sup>43</sup> Cuthbertson, *Nobody said not to go*, p.140.

<sup>44</sup> Hahn, *Mr Pan*, p.8.

<sup>45</sup> The Chinese branch of PEN, the writers' association first established in London in 1921, was formed in Shanghai by Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培 in December 1929.



<sup>46</sup> Li Guangde, "Shao Xunmeide shi yu shilun," p.2.

<sup>47</sup> Lu Xun, "Kan Xiao he 'kan Xiao de renmin' ji" [Watching Shaw and the Shaw-watchers], *Lu Xun quanji*, vol.4, pp.495–6.

<sup>48</sup> Hahn, *Steps of the sun*, p.62. Lord Alfred Northcliffe (1865–1922), the most successful publisher in the history of the British press and the founder of popular modern journalism through such publications as the *Daily Mail*.

## Figure 16

*Cartoon of Shao by the Mexican painter and illustrator Miguel Covarrubias (1904–57). Covarrubias achieved fame as a stage designer and as a contributor of drawings and caricatures for such prestigious publications as The New Yorker and Vanity Fair*



of foreign friends, most notably Emily Hahn. Shao always had the gift of the gab, but on this occasion he was particularly sparkling; a few witty remarks to A one minute, then some words in some foreign tongue to B the next. He and Lin Yutang 林語堂 sang a duet and then Yutang introduced him to a particular foreign lady as an author that every young lady should know.<sup>46</sup>

PEN offered a haven for those intellectuals like Shao, Xu Zhimo, Lin Yutang, and Zeng Xubai who had resisted the general drift to the left. More importantly, at a time when the city was regularly playing host to a stellar cast of international authors from Tagore to Somerset Maugham, PEN also came

to symbolize a more active engagement with the literary world outside China. To its critics, however, PEN served as little more than a mutual admiration society. Lu Xun offers a particularly acerbic account of one such function in honour of George Bernard Shaw. Here he describes how the fifty or so authors and starlets privileged enough to receive an invitation crowded around the guest of honour and began "bombarding him with questions as if consulting the *Encyclopedia Britannica*." But the situation deteriorated further when Shao (or as Lu Xun referred to him, "a man widely regarded as attractive") presented Shaw with gifts including a novelty ashtray and an opera costume. Shaw's inquiries as to their origin only elicited eager responses from those present, all designed to highlight the speaker's ready wit.<sup>47</sup>

Shao's status as a literary celebrity proved to be more enduring than his fame as a poet. While he continued to enjoy success in the city's salons, his poetic career was effectively over. Very soon his fame would come to depend not on his own output but on that of others.

## *The Passing of the Chinese Verlaine*

In *Steps of the Sun*, Emily Hahn records a conversation between her and Shao's fictional counterparts which attests to the dramatic shift in Shao's literary reputation in the 1930s:

"Are you the Chinese Cocteau, for instance?"

He took these words seriously and considered, "Cocteau? No, I will not say that. I am not a poet any more, and even when I was a poet, I was something like Swinburne, but not Cocteau."

"... Well who are you, then?"

"The Chinese Northcliffe," he said solemnly. "I publish magazines and newspapers. Popular ones. You are disappointed?"<sup>48</sup>

Sadly, there were few to lament the passing of the Chinese Verlaine. If *Paradise and May* can be said to have captured the

mid-twenties *Zeitgeist*, then by the time Shao's final collection of verse, *Twenty-five Poems* (Shi ershiwu shou 詩二十五首), appeared in 1936, his particular brand of aestheticism was looking decidedly stale. Much had changed in the literary world since the appearance of *Flower-like Evil* seven years earlier. In an era of rampant nationalism and political turmoil, the literary arena was now polarized. It was a marketplace where works by the strident Left competed for sales with the urban romances of the Neo-Sensualist school (Xin ganjuepai 新感覺派). What little attention *Twenty-five Poems* did garner was again predominately negative. To his contemporaries, Shao's depiction of beauty as an ethereal female spirit, his use of religious (specifically Catholic) imagery, and the decadent union of beauty and evil was out of keeping with the new proletarian age.

In his lengthy prelude to this collection, the author was quick to distinguish these more mature works from those that preceded them, dismissing all his previous work as that of a "youthful braggadocio." For the author, this earlier verse, which helped secure his place among the literary élite, now seemed "pitifully naive" and "an exquisitely ornate creation, which while pleasing to the ear and the eye had meaning only at a superficial level."<sup>49</sup> Still more revealing was his admission that his earliest efforts were not influenced by Japanese haiku as some suspected but were simply "abridged or altered versions of famous English poems."<sup>50</sup> While this apologia may well have suggested a new beginning, in actuality it signaled the rather ignominious conclusion to what had once seemed a promising literary career.

In their attempts to restore Shao's battered reputation, later scholars such as Li Guangde 李光德 have looked for signs in Shao's poetic swan-song that he was, at last, moving away from aesthetic hedonism. For Li, the closing lines of "Xunmei's Dream" (Xunmeide meng 洵美的夢) suggest a more active participation in the world around him<sup>51</sup>:

My destiny is now completely clear;  
I shall never reside in the palace of the immortals.  
Ah! I do not want to dream, but to wake, to wake.<sup>52</sup>

While his privileged upbringing, aristocratic persona and even the timbre of his verse might imply that Shao lived in a sumptuous fantasy world, this was certainly not the case. The financial reality facing Shao as head of the family in the 1930s meant that a career in poetry, a dream he had harboured since youth, was now an unaffordable luxury. Even before the publication of *Twenty-five Poems*, Shao was already directing his energy towards publishing in a desperate attempt to make ends meet. Shao's vision for his new career was in many senses as grandiose as his poetry and one that would eventually spell the end of the family fortune.

Though they had managed to keep up appearances, for some years the Shao clan had suffered from cash-flow problems. As early as 1928, the spendthrift ways of Shao's father and many of his offspring had forced the

<sup>49</sup> Shao Xunmei, *Shi ershiwu shou*, p.8.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p.6.

<sup>51</sup> Li Guangde, "Shao Xunmeide shi yu shilun," p.5.

<sup>52</sup> Shao Xunmei, *Shi ershiwu shou*, pp.3-5.

<sup>53</sup> Specific to Shanghai, this new style of tenement housing sprang up across the city in the first few decades of the twentieth century to accommodate the spiraling population, and consisted of multiple apartment blocks connected by a series of alleys or 'longtang'. Many of the *longtang* apartments constructed by the Shao clan stand to this day and can be found running from Nanjing West Road (南京西路) to Fenyang Road (汾陽路).

**Figure 17**

*Studio portrait of Shao, 1946. Shao's poetic fame was long behind him and he was now attempting to rebuild his career as a gentleman-publisher (photo courtesy of Shao Xiaohong)*



family to take desperate measures. The solution to their monetary woes was an ambitious construction project which would see a large *longtang* 弄堂 apartment complex built on the family land stretching from Bubbling Well Road in the north to Burkill Road (Baikē lù 白克路) in the south.<sup>53</sup> Having borrowed a substantial sum of money to complete this mammoth undertaking, the family soon discovered that the rents received from these properties were barely sufficient to cover their spiralling living costs. By February 1932 when Shao's aunt (and adoptive mother) passed away, the family, still lumbered with hefty mortgage repayments, struggled to scrape together sufficient funds

to pay for a funeral worthy of the family's matriarch. Less than two years later and in danger of defaulting on their loans, Shao sold the family's remaining property holdings in Shanghai to the bank. Left with only the ancestral lands and a little capital, Shao now became the family's sole bread-winner.

The plan to reinvent himself as a publishing magnate was not entirely untenable. While not known for his business acumen, Shao's previous publishing ventures had at least taught him some of the many pitfalls he would need to avoid in future. Furthermore, his extensive connections would ensure there was never a shortage of high-profile contributors for the many publications he had on the drawing board. Perhaps most important to Shao was that his new career as gentleman-publisher secured (no matter how tenuously) his place in the limelight.

With the family's remaining capital, Shao now purchased what would be the backbone of his publishing empire. Complete with rotogravure section, Shao's new printing press was in its day the most sophisticated piece of equipment of its kind ever imported into China. Shao's rationale for so extravagant a purchase was that the income this equipment was sure to generate from printing the works of his competitors would in turn subsidize his own publications. These he envisaged as the equal of Western glossy magazines such as *Life* and *Harper's Bazaar* which were certain to appeal to the fashion-conscious reading public of Shanghai. With Paris-trained Gao Yuanzai 高元宰 installed as head technician, Shao's golden age of publishing could now begin.

### *The Crescent Moon Débâcle*

Shao's track record in the publishing industry had been anything but glorious. While still busy with his vanity publication *The Golden Chamber*, Shao had been invited to become part of the team at *Crescent Moon Monthly* (Xinyue yuekan 新月月刊), which had been founded in March 1928. To Shao this was a highly attractive offer. Not only did it provide the opportunity

to work alongside Xu Zhimo, but also involvement with a prestigious and successful publication which counted Hu Shi 胡適, Liang Shiqiu, Lin Yutang and Shen Congwen among its regular contributors.

However, all did not go to plan. Despite his financial investment and position on the editorial team, Shao found he had little say in the day-to-day running of the publication. With Xu's untimely death in a much-publicized plane crash in November 1931, Shao not only lost his closest ally but now found himself increasingly isolated from his colleagues. Faced with widely differing agendas, the migration to Beiping 北平 by many of the movement's leading lights, and staunch opposition to change by the likes of Luo Longji 羅隆基, Shao finally canvassed sufficient support to close the magazine in June 1933.

Shao did not come away from the Crescent Moon debacle empty-handed. With first hand experience of the destruction inflicted by the clash of giant egos, Shao understood clearly that in regard to future publishing ventures it would be best to go it alone. More importantly, he developed a friendship with Lin Yutang; it was a partnership that would soon spawn one of Shao's most successful publishing concerns. Rebounding from this somewhat disastrous foray into the world of serious publishing, Shao soon launched a still more ambitious undertaking: the Epoch Book Company (Shidai tushu gongsi 時代圖書公司).

### *Embracing Vulgarity*

In 1934, the former *Crescent Moon* offices in Jiujiang Road (九江路) became home to what Shao hoped would soon become a new publishing empire. From here Shao unveiled his blueprint for an astonishing variety of new publications, from illustrated journals to bilingual periodicals, many of which he would ultimately realize with varying degrees of success. A notable omission from this catalogue was the type of highbrow journal in which he had formerly specialized. Rather than catering to a limited number of friends and colleagues, Shao was now aiming at the city's increasingly sophisticated petty-bourgeoisie hungry for entertainment and enlightenment. Publications such as *The Young Companion* (Liangyou huabao 良友畫報) had proved that a huge market existed for this particular brand of lifestyle publication and Shao was keen to capitalize on their success. In severe financial distress, Shao had but one option left open to him: kowtow to the vulgar.

Appearing almost two years prior to the formation of

**Figure 18**

*Advertisement for Modern Miscellany (Shidai huabao 時代畫報), a popular lifestyle publication which along with The Analects (Lunyu 論語) would prove to be one of Shao's few publishing successes*



<sup>54</sup> Zhang Kebiao, "Haishang caizi gao chuban – ji Shao Xunmei," p.5.

<sup>55</sup> Zhu Lianbao, *Jinxiandai Shanghai chubanye yinxiang ji* [Impressions of the publishing industry in modern Shanghai] (Shanghai: Xuelin Chubanshe, 1993), p.247.

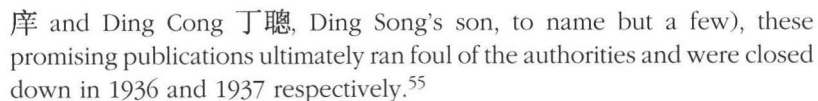
Shao's new publishing empire, *Modern Miscellany* (also known in English as *Epoch Pictorial*) was the prototype for all the publications in Shao's stable.<sup>54</sup> Modeled on the *The Young Companion*, *Modern Miscellany* featured the same mixture of photographs, cartoons, social news and lightweight editorial content and its limited success encouraged Shao to employ the same formula in subsequent ventures. However, new publications such as *Epoch Literature* (Shidai wenxue 時代文學) and *Epoch Cinema* (Shidai dianying 時代電影) were competing in a marketplace close to saturation point and Shao soon learnt that not even their high-quality format or famous feature writers could guarantee sales.

Whereas Shao's poetic career might be characterized as dramatic yet static, his publishing career was one of ceaseless change and constant innovation. Though catering for less refined tastes, Shao was still able to assemble the best new talent the city had to offer in order to staff the growing list of publications under the Epoch banner. In doing so, he added yet another feather to his cap, the role of patron.

The launching pad for a new generation of artists, poets, translators and authors, Epoch was perhaps the single greatest achievement of Shao's literary career. Though he benefited immensely from their involvement, Shao cannot be cast as the cynical businessman exploiting a pool of cheap labour, and his continued largesse suggests he was only too happy to use his literary celebrity to advance their careers. With political confrontation and mud-slinging now the favoured pastimes of the literary giants, Shao found refuge in the company of a younger and less bitter circle.

Wang Yingxia 王映霞, Zhu Weiji 朱維基 and Li Qingyan were just some of the now well-respected figures to bring their works to Shao for his perusal. But Shao's influence was still more discernible in his sponsorship of three young poets: Chen Mengjia, He Jiahui 何家槐 and Xu Chi 徐遲, all of whom were then students at Guanghai University (光華大學). Though no longer fashionable as a poet himself, Shao shared with this younger generation a Western aesthetic sensibility and a preoccupation with the beauty of poetic form, in particular the close attention paid to structure, diction and rhyme.

Epoch publications also displayed Shao's continuing fixation with the visual appeal of his books and journals. To this end, he once again began consorting with the city's leading artists and it was their input that was largely responsible for the polish these publications might otherwise have lacked. Works by established artists such as Zhang Guangyu, Zhang Zhenyu 張振宇 and Ye Qianyu 葉淺予 all appeared in *Modern Miscellany* introducing the Shanghai public to classic cartoon strips, including Ye's "Mr Wang" (Wang xiansheng 王先生). Shao was not blind to the growing public appetite for this new art form and quickly put two new magazines into production: *Cartoon World* (Manhua jie 漫畫界) and *Epoch Cartoons* (Shidai manhua 時代漫畫), edited by Lu Shaofei and Wang Dunqing 王敦慶. Offering exposure to up-and-coming artists (Cao Hanmei 曹涵美, Lu Zhixiang 陸志



**Figure 19**

*Ye Qianyu's famous cartoon strip, "Mr Wang," which ran in Shao's flagship journal Modern Miscellany*

<sup>56</sup> *Renyan* was published by Shanghai Diyi Chubanshe (上海第一出版社) and edited by Shao under the pen name Guo Ming 郭明.

<sup>57</sup> Zhang Kebiao, "Haishang caizi gao chuban – ji Shao Xunmei," p.7.

social and political issues of the day. However, in an era of strict censorship and with publishing now his livelihood, he quite wisely steered clear of controversy. It was such caution that prompted him to set up a separate publishing house for a new and potentially provocative journal entitled *People's Voice* (Ren yan 人言) which was conceived as a replacement for the immensely popular *Life* (Shenghuo 生活), itself banned in 1934.<sup>56</sup>

Though it was the less politically motivated efforts that were destined to bring him his greatest success, rather ironically Shao received little in the way of recognition for what was surely the most successful and cutting edge of these publications, *The Analects*. Despite Shao's significant contribution as co-creator, contributor, editor, and publisher, today *The Analects* is generally remembered as the leading satirical journal of its era and the brainchild of its editor, Lin Yutang. Never a fan of Lin, Zhang Kebiao claims to have devised the title after Lin had vetoed every other suggestion, his final choice somewhat sarcastically equating Lin's own words with those of the great sage. While Zhang grudgingly admits that the success of this journal was largely due to Lin's trademark brand of humour, nonetheless he also accuses Lin of having hijacked what began as a collaborative effort, enforcing his own editorial vision and stacking the staff with cronies.<sup>57</sup>

Although this lack of recognition was to become one of Shao's chief regrets it did not adversely effect his friendship with Lin. Probably, Shao was grateful for Lin's editorial vision, for he himself was now primarily concerned with the seemingly insurmountable difficulties which threatened to destroy his fledgling empire. The tale of Epoch's demise is both tragedy and farce. Shao's dream ultimately fell victim to both historical circumstance and self-inflicted wounds. The failure rate of Epoch publications was alarmingly high and Shao's limited success proved to be little more than a Pyrrhic victory in the ongoing battle with a fickle reading public, ruthless competition and the ever vigilant censors. Epoch's state-of-the-art printing press had fulfilled its promise and secured large accounts such as *The Young Companion*, but the great profits Shao had imagined failed to materialize. He needed to import even the ink used by the press, and not only were there problems of supply but printing costs themselves remained exorbitant. Without skilled technicians and adequate maintenance, the quality of the final product fell well below both the equipment's capabilities and Shao's own expectations. This seemingly self-perpetuating cycle of success and failure might have continued were it not for an event that spelt the end not only of Shao's celebrity but also brought the curtain down on the city's golden age.

### *A World Without Beauty*

In 1926, Shao's first published poem, "She" (Ta 她) appeared in the *Morning Post Supplement* (Chenbao fukan 晨報副刊), edited by Xu Zhimo.<sup>58</sup> In its final line the budding poet asks, "Without beauty, what sort of world is possible?" Eleven years on, Shao would finally discover the answer. With the Japanese invasion of the Chinese city the once thriving metropolis was reduced to an isolated island (*gudao* 孤島) and Shao now began to withdraw from the world around him. Though his printing press had been rescued from the hands of the Japanese (largely thanks to Emily Hahn), Shao appeared uninterested in his crumbling empire. As always there were more pressing demands on his time. Maintaining his hectic social schedule, the former landlord was also busy looking for a new mansion he could no longer afford to rent, while the one-time collector was selling off his remaining heirlooms for a pittance. To supplement this meagre income, the talented poet was writing up to three detective novels a month. At the same time the publishing magnate was now in the business of printing pornography. But Shao was destined to suffer further indignities, including hair loss following treatment for a paralyzed facial nerve and an even greater loss of face as relatives began accepting hand-outs from a younger brother, who was now collaborating with the Japanese.<sup>59</sup>

The two attempts Shao made to resuscitate his publishing career, first in the post-war era, then in the newly established People's Republic, were doomed from their inception. In the "new China" Shao, like the city he had come to represent, was forced into continual penance for his former incarnations. It was a symbol of his fall that not even the unwanted title of landlord could be applied to the once great aristocrat. As a patriotic gesture Shao had donated the family lands to the government and walked away with the status of common urbanite. His printing equipment was now sold to the government for a bargain-basement price, and soon churned out the first colour propaganda in praise of the new regime. Ironically, the once great publisher, who now spent his time translating the works of Shelley, Tagore and Twain, found it next to impossible to get his own works into print.<sup>60</sup> Shao's life ebbed away as the city's new incarnation reached maturity. In 1968, with only his son in attendance, Shao passed away at home in what had once served as the garage of his Huaihai Road (淮海路) property.

<sup>58</sup> *Chenbao shikan* [Morning Post: poetry supplement], 2 February 1926.

<sup>59</sup> Wu Lilan, "Du liangpian jilu Zhang Kebiao tanhua de wenzhang yougan" [Thoughts on two articles recording conversations with Zhang Kebiao], *Huzhou shizhuan xuebao*, 1985.2: 20.

<sup>60</sup> Shao's translations published after 1949 include Shelley's *Prometheus unbound*, Twain's *The adventures of Tom Sawyer*, and Tagore's *The home and the world*.

**Figure 20**

*One of the last photographs ever taken of Shao, aged approximately fifty (photo courtesy of Shao Xiaohong)*



<sup>61</sup> Following his return from Europe, Shao was briefly a member of the Nationalist Party and appeared to have entertained the notion of a career in politics. See Hahn, *China to me*, p.19.

<sup>62</sup> Jia Zhifang, "Wode nanyou Shao Xunmei" [My cell-mate, Shao Xunmei], *Jia Zhifang zixuan* [Selected works of Jia Zhifeng] (Jinan: Shandong Jiaoyu Chubanshe, 1998), pp.125–34.

## Mythologies

In the late 1950s as the Anti-Rightist Movement gained momentum, Shao, like so many intellectuals of his generation, found himself languishing behind bars. Fittingly, this most apolitical of beings, who once consorted with the Nationalist élite whilst providing support for agents of the Communist underground, was incarcerated not for harbouring a counter-revolutionary agenda but for his "complex connections."<sup>61</sup> While the authorities sought to untangle the complexities of his past lives, the seriously ill Shao was busy contemplating his own legacy. To this end he now implored his cell-mate Jia Zhifang 賈植芳 to write an article one day which would dispel some of the many misconceptions of both his life and his work. Seemingly prepared to let his poetry be judged on its own merits, Shao was more concerned by Lu Xun's scurrilous allegation that he had frequently employed a ghost writer. Equally upsetting were newspaper accounts of a dinner party for George Bernard Shaw which Shao, as secretary of PEN, had arranged at the famous vegetarian restaurant Gongdelin 功德林. While journalists noted that those present at this elegant gathering had included such worthies as Lu Xun, Cai Yuanpei and Song Qingling 宋慶齡, not one made reference to Shao.<sup>62</sup> Clearly, Shao's deathbed request was not that he be remembered as the great artist but simply that his standing amongst the literary and social élite be restored. It had, after all, earned him amongst many other honours the position of host in Lu Shaofei's

cartoon.

Such hopes were in vain and, in the years since his death, Shao has suffered the even greater humiliation of having been all but airbrushed out of history. His limited appearances are as an historical footnote in accounts of his more famous peers. He is invariably cast in the unflattering roles of decadent (*tui feipai* 頹廢派), dandy (*wanku zidi* 紈袴子弟) and playboy (*huahua gongzi* 花花公子). It is this mythology, surrounding both Shao and the city, that has hampered all subsequent attempts at a clear understanding of this figure, let alone a "posthumous rehabilitation." For while Shanghai's history remains a fable filled with classic heroes and villains, Shao can only be remembered by traits which sit comfortably with the firmly-entrenched clichés that still colour perceptions of the seductive yet shameful metropolis. These stereotypes have in turn established the ground rules for the ongoing

Shanghai revival which seems content to rediscover only those politically incorrect authors (such as Mu Shiying 穆時英 and Ye Lingfeng 葉靈風) who fit neatly into the pre-established portrait of the literary world. Shao's legacy upsets this precarious arrangement by highlighting a literary arena riddled with inconsistencies and contradictions, where Leftist authors at times showed decadent sympathies and purveyors of the New Culture voiced both patriotic and "Sinophobic" sentiments.

With his reputation inextricably linked with that of Republican Shanghai, Shao is unique amongst his contemporaries, for he exemplifies not only the city at the height of its *belle époque* but also the seemingly inevitable failure of its ideals. The product of an euphoric new era, Shao was initially cast as the model citizen of a metropolis considered the prototype for a new and enlightened China. However, this intellectual belief in modernity was ultimately betrayed by the advent of a frivolous, vulgar and profit-driven culture which sent the reputations of both Shao and the city into terminal decline.

Under a new aesthetic and political regime, the label of decadent has been applied retrogressively to both Republican Shanghai and its one-time cultural ambassador. Yet, perhaps it is not so much the identification of Shao with decadence that has hampered his rehabilitation, as much as the (mis)understanding of this term and its application. For it is the very bankruptcy of the lofty cultural ambitions he once embodied and not his *fin-de-siècle* posturings, his aristocratic bohemianism, or for that matter his immoral verse that is at the heart of Shao's decadence. Shao's fame was the product of an era characterized by great social upheaval and cultural diversity, one which, true to Paul Bourget's theory (of decadence), saw "the social evolution toward individualism and the 'individualistic' manifestations of artistic language ... typical of '*le style de décadence*'".<sup>63</sup> It is this individual spirit that is visible in all of Shao's personae, that singular blend of the traditional and the modern, the foreign and the Chinese, the insular and the cosmopolitan. Though frequently hidden beneath layers of debt to Swinburne, Baudelaire and George

<sup>63</sup> Matei Calinescu, *Five faces of modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1987), p.170.

**Figure 21**

*Portrait of Shao by the acclaimed artist Xu Beibong 徐悲鴻*



Moore, it is evident in a unique poetic vision that both shocked yet enchanted his contemporaries. This very same personality, now somewhat older and wiser, is stamped upon a whole range of publications which, while pandering to popular tastes, all feature the flourish of a single artistic vision. It is perhaps most apparent in his eminently lovable social persona: the celebrity-scholar who kept up appearances despite facing financial ruin, the party animal whose hijinks were worthy of space in gossip columns and whose eccentricities delighted readers around the world.

Always one for the grand gesture, it is fitting that Shao can now be regarded as the last vestige of an era's aesthetic individualism, as the man who fell victim not only to the city's bid for modernity but to the increasing demand for cultural conformity. Those literary icons who prospered from this chain of events have a great deal to fear from Shao's posthumous rehabilitation, for few if any can match this forgotten man of letters in wit, urbanity, and sense of (Shanghai) style.

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